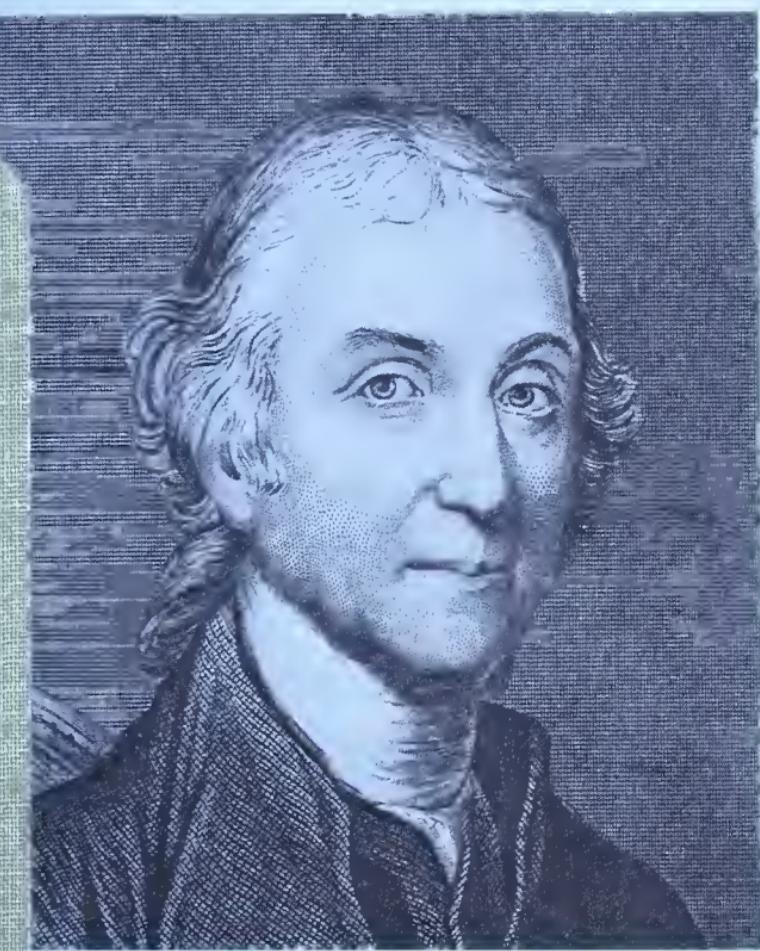


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Pennsylvania Historical and  
Museum Commission.  
Priestley House

PENNSYLVANIA TRAIL OF HISTORY



# PRIESTLEY HOUSE

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The Pennsylvania Home of  
a Famous Pioneer Chemist

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**THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL  
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OCT 8 1967

The Englishman Joseph Priestley, world-famous as the discoverer of oxygen, built his last home at Northumberland on the Susquehanna River in 1794, a home open now to visitors on the *Pennsylvania Trail of History*. This home was the great scientist and dissenting divine's final refuge from harassment and persecution.

Joseph Priestley was born in England in 1733; his early fondness for reading was followed by his choice of a career in the ministry. His education was extensive for the day, and laid the foundation for the great variety of interests which characterized his later life. As a champion of reform in British government, an exponent of a rationalist interpretation of the Scriptures, and an adherent of both the American and French revolutions, Priestley was a controversial figure. He was also a teacher, and was one of the first to advocate both the teaching of modern history and the benefits of outdoor trips of observation in teaching science.

Priestley, the minister of religion, conducted his scientific experiments only in his spare time until 1773, when the support of Lord Shelburne enabled him to devote his full energies to his own selection of projects. Priestley made most of his lasting discoveries during the next seven years. His experiments with carbon dioxide, particularly



in establishing a simple method for its extraction, were the foundation of the soda-water industry. In the course of his experimentation with air, he isolated oxygen, the discovery of which is the basis of his lasting fame. He did not realize the importance of this discovery, however, and so he called oxygen "dephlogisticated air" in accordance with the theory of combustibility which he held to the end of his life.



While carrying on his experiments, Priestley became well acquainted with Benjamin Franklin, then living in London. Priestley supported the rights of colonists in America, and, indeed, did not view their separation from England with any alarm. His later support of the French Revolution aroused much opposition, however, and in 1791 his home in Birmingham was attacked and destroyed by an angry mob. In the next few years, having left the service of Lord Shelburne, Priestley had difficulty finding a parish which would accept his services. He could evoke little sympathy from anyone outside his immediate circle of friends.

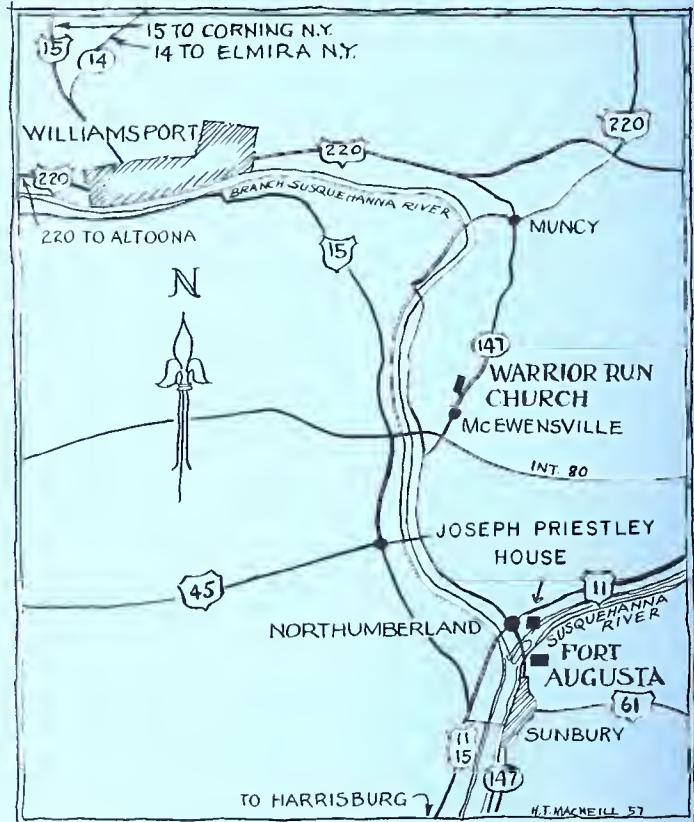
In 1794, with France and England at war, Priestley and his family decided to emigrate to America, where they hoped public opinion would be more tolerant of dissenting political and religious views. Priestley and his wife left England in April, and spent most of their two months at sea suffering from seasickness. In August, the Priestleys landed in New York. Prominent citizens turned out to give them a most hospitable reception, and they were greatly impressed with the city. A trip to Philadelphia, the cultural center of the country, was of course essential. Here they found the climate unpleasant and the cost of living too high for Priestley's income. Nor could he find support for the Unitarian parish he hoped to establish. Thus they decided to travel to Northumberland, where a colony of English refugees had been planned under the direction of Dr. Thomas Cooper.

The trip from Philadelphia to Northumberland took five days of difficult travel; at one point the Priestleys had to spend the night in a wagon. Northumberland in 1794 had only a hundred houses; yet the climate was pleasant, and Mrs. Priestley was very happy there. Although the English refugee colony failed to materialize, Priestley went ahead with plans to build his home there. Lumber was dried at the site, and carpenters were imported from Philadelphia. When finished, the house consisted of the large center section, joined on one side by a kitchen wing and on the other by a laboratory. The front lawn originally extended to the North Branch of the Susquehanna, but after 1828 was cut off by a canal. Later a railroad replaced the canal, and in 1860 another railroad, since removed, was built across the back lawn.

Joseph Priestley lived the remainder of his life in Northumberland, making occasional trips to Philadelphia to preach or to address the American Philosophical Society. He noted with approval the election of his friend Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency. After Priestley's death in 1804, the house passed through the hands of several owners. In 1874 chemists journeyed to the



Priestley House to commemorate the centennial of the discovery of oxygen. This meeting led to the founding of the American Chemical Society in 1876. In 1919 a professor at Pennsylvania State University bought the Priestley House with the intent of moving it to the campus. This idea was later abandoned, and the house was operated as a museum by the University until it was deeded to Northumberland in 1955. In 1960, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission assumed administration of the house. Today it stands much as it did in Priestley's time, with a small museum of his personal effects to aid in recapturing the spirit of this multi-faceted man.



#### *Visiting Hours*

DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME: 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. weekdays except Monday; 1:00 to 5:00 P.M. Sunday.

WINTER: 9:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. weekdays except Monday; 1:00 to 4:30 P.M. Sunday.  
Hours subject to change.

Telephone: Northumberland, Code 717, 473-9474

The Priestley House is located on Priestley Avenue one block east of bridge to Sunbury on Pa. 147 and one block south of U. S. 11.